

Venetians and Ottomans in the Early Modern Age

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The last Venetian-Byzantine Trade Agreement and Mehmed II's First Peace Agreement with Venice

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Abstract The goal of this article is to compare two inter-state commercial charters as the title suggests, a chrysobull by the Byzantine emperor John VIII and a document signed by Mehmed the Conqueror. The Ottoman Empire at that time was expanding at the expense of the Venetian thalassocracy, and particularly Byzantium. Venice, in its turn, was deriving more trade privileges from the dying Byzantine Empire. The emphasis in the article will be put on the similarities between the documents proving the continuity in the various spheres of international politics in the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period.

Keywords Venice. Byzantium. Ottoman empire. John VIII Paleologus. Sultan Mehmed II. Trade privileges. Ahd-nāme. Chrysobull.



The present work will deal with two commercial charters from the middle of the 15th century settling the relations between Venice and Byzantium and the Ottoman Empire. The first one was signed in 1446 between Venice and Sultan Mehmed II the Conqueror (1444-1446, 1451-1481) and the other one, from 1448, is between *La Serenissima* and one of the last Byzantine Emperors – John VIII Paleologus (1425-1448), confirming the Venetian commercial privileges in Constantinople. The original of both texts is in Greek, and they are kept in the Venetian archive, together with their copies translated into Italian. In fact, all the peace treaties of the Ottoman Sultans with European states were written in Greek until the end of the 15th century.

First, however, a brief introduction of the historical context surrounding the issuance of the two documents is needed. As it is clear from the chronological period, there are contrasting circumstances surrounding the Byzantine Empire and the Ottoman state. While the former was already a small entity taking its last breaths of air, the latter was undertaking a swift expansion, replacing the Eastern Roman Empire from its previous place. The Turkish rulers were imposing their authority on an ever larger territory, and finally including on the highly coveted Constantinople. In the past, Byzantium had controlled many of the trade routes in the Orient and the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as the commercial activities in

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the Black Sea region. Now, this role is taken over by the Ottoman Empire. In addition to the drastic weakening of the Byzantine power, the eroding effect, exercised on it by another great force, this time maritime – Venice – can be observed. The latter placed Constantinople under strong economic dependence and financial indebtedness. Nevertheless, the Greek emperors tried to limit, to a certain extent, the Venetian trade privileges on the territory of the Byzantine Empire.

The treaty between Mehmed II and Venice followed directly an important watershed event – the famous Crusade of Varna in 1444, led by King Władisław III of Poland, John Huniadi – Voivode of Transylvania and Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy. It resulted in a disastrous defeat for the Christian forces and Franz Babinger (1992, 40) refers to this episode as being

one of the most decisive events not only of the Ottoman, but of all Western history.

and that the neighboring countries of the Ottomam Empire, along with others, were “paralyzed with fear”.

Under these circumstances, part of the Christian powers were seeking cooperation with the Sultan, and Venice seemed to have adopted the most realistic stance by undertaking measures to come to suitable terms with Mehmed II (Babinger 1992, 42). The Venetians were one of the first to regulate Venice trade privileges with the Ottomans, and the 1446 charter is perhaps the only one left to the present day from Mehmed the Conqueror’s first ruling period (Babinger 1992, 44). Moreover, this treaty, the oldest preserved Ottoman document written in Greek (Theunissen 1998, 196) is found in the Venetian State Archives¹ published by Babinger and Dölger (1956, 270-7). Scholars like Maria Pia Pedani Fabris have also contributed to a great degree in publishing documents of this kind, such as the latest Ottoman imperial treaty, also written in Greek (Pedani Fabris 1994).

The official name of this type of documents is *ahd-nāme* and it represents an interstate treaty, agreement, convention (Stoyanov 1991, 145). According to Hans Theunissen (1998), the most accurate translation of chrysobull (John VIII’s document, here analyzed, which is also a chrysobull), is namely *ahd-nāme*. The author rejects another possible translation as *ferman*, as this would be interpreted as order, decree, command, whereas the chrysobull or *ahd-nāme* does not represent a vertical relationship, but is rather a treaty between two parties that are considered equivalent (Theunissen 1998, 62).

According to Stoyanov (1991), the form of the opening part of the documents of the *nāme* type consists of the following well-known elements:

1 Venezia, Archivio di Stato (ASVe), *Miscellanea Atti Diplomatici e Privati*, b. 38, no. 1110.

the invocation – which includes the calling of God’s name –, the prophet, and the first four righteous caliphs. It proceeds with a list of the titles and possessions of the Sultan or his genealogy, in other words with the intitulation (Theunissen 1998, 143). There is also a brief appeal to the addressee called inscription, which is sometimes accompanied by a greeting (salutation), after which comes the actual text. In the narrative part of the document the following elements – exposition, disposition and sanction – are identified. The so called eschatocol or the final part of the document is followed by the date (Theunissen 1998, 263), and these characteristics largely coincide with the form of the Byzantine chrysobull. First, however, it is necessary to briefly examine the content of the two documents – the charters of Emperor John VIII and Sultan Mehmed II.

Mehmed’s *ahd-nāme* deals with issues such as the conditions for the exchange of slaves between the two empires, the rights and freedoms of merchants, the penalties that both countries have to bear for damages, thefts, etc., and it is clear that the measures must be reciprocal for both sides (Thomas, Predelli [1880-89] 2012, 366).² Thus, for example, the charter states that if a Venetian slave, for whatever reason, should find himself in a place which is a part of my dominion (i.e. the Ottoman state) and has become a Muslim, then 1,000 aspers in cash must be paid to my lordship for every slave, and if he is a Christian, he must be returned without any excuse (Rakova 2017, 310).³

The same applies to the Venetians with respect towards Mehmed’s empire (Rakova 2017, 310). And if the slave is a Christian, he has to go back without any justification. Similarly, as far as the merchants are concerned, the document states that all Venetian traders, and those who consider themselves Venetians, in whatever place of *My Lordship* they might be, go, come and trade with each other as Venetians, so that any of them should infringe or commit any other wrongdoing, must not be detained or punished one for the other. Likewise, the same must apply to my merchants that are located in the places of the Venetians (Rakova 2017, 310). The treaty from 1446 itself is almost a literal repetition of another such agreement between the Ottomans and Venice from 1430 (Rakova 2017, 128).

Actually, the cooperation with Mehmed did not come without a prize for Venice. In fact, the Ottomans collaborated more with Venice’s main maritime rival, Genoa. The latter was given a trade capitulation by the Ottomans as early as 1352 and with it the monopoly over the alum pro-

² Here we can find the original Greek text of the treaty, whereas the Italian translation is in Thomas, Predelli 1880-89, 366-72. Clauses of the document in Greek could also be found in Babinger 1950, 267-71.

³ The Bulgarian translation of a later document between Venice and the Ottoman Empire from 1454 in Rakova 2017, 306-16 is used here, because the author found out that parts of the treaty from 1446 are identical with it.

duction in Manisa (İnalçık 1973, 134). In return, the Genoese helped the Ottomans in critical moments, for example, by ferrying soldiers across the Dardanelles in 1444 during the above mentioned crusade of Varna and observing neutrality during the decisive siege of Constantinople. The Turks also implemented economic tactics against Venice. Thus by renewing the trade privileges of the Venetians and allowing them to trade wheat, the Sultan convinced them to subside their efforts in case of war like the two pointed out in this paragraph (İnalçık 1973, 134). Nonetheless, Venice and the Ottomans could be considered to have been fairly equal partners in these capitulations. Nothing like this can be said about the mutual relations between the Serenissima and Byzantium, arranged through documents like John VIII's chrysobull.

This charter is also a repetition and confirmation of other treaties signed previously. In this case, there are eight of them, issued in 1406, 1412, 1418, 1423, 1431, 1436, 1442 and 1448. As Donald Nicol (2001, 497) writes, reading the text of the last treaty, signed in 1448 is reading something that even then had passed History. It explicitly reiterates that Byzantium owes Venice 30,000 gold ducats with the interest, for which a part of the imperial treasury was pawned 105 years ago, so the loan was from 1343 (Nicol 2001, 497). This gives the idea of the great indebtedness of the Byzantine *basileus* to Venice, as already mentioned above.

The charter also settles other issues such as the reduction of the number of Venetian pubs in Constantinople to 15, the conditions under which the Venetians were permitted to sell wheat in the territory of the Byzantine Empire (Miklosich, Müller 1865, 217-19). They could not trade grain produced on Greek soil and were forbidden to present themselves as Romans. In Mehmed's *ahd-nâme*, on the other hand, it is simply said that the Venetians can trade freely within the Ottoman Empire. The chrysobull also concisely refers to the island of Tenedos in the Aegean Sea, where the Emperor (as well as Venice and Genoa, which had led a long and exhausting war for it) has a special interest because of its strategic location at the mouth of the Dardanelles. It is literally said, however, that this question remains "hanging in the air" (Miklosich, Müller 1865, 222).

Notwithstanding the different circumstances under which these contracts were drawn up, and hence the reason for their production, it is possible to discern many resemblances between them. It is difficult not to mention the fact that the diplomatic and business language is similar, the beautiful, frilly style of expression is observed in both documents. For example, the Venetian Doge Francesco Foscari (1423-1457) is described in John's Chrysobull as prominent, remarkable and magnificent (Miklosich, Müller 1865, 216). Such flattering words are also used in the Ottoman-Venetian document with respect to the same figure. Besides, the Byzantine Emperor swears on the life-giving cross and the Gospels, while Mehmed takes the oath to the 124,000 prophets from Adam to Mohammed

(Babinger, Dölger 1956, 270). The titularity of the ruler, as well as the lavishly embellished with epithets introductory part also contribute to the similarity of the papers.

A more detailed look at Mehmed's *ahd-nāme* and John's chrysobull reveals even more identical structural features such as the *invocatio* or the administration of an oath in the name of God. In Mehmed's charter, it is represented by the phrase "In the name of the great Lord, amen", while the chrysobull contains a stylized cross at the very beginning of the text, or the so-called symbolic *invocatio*. In the next element – the combined 'titularity-oath', the sultan swears on the above-mentioned prophets, as well as on his life and the life and soul of his father. The Byzantine basis is considerably more laconic in this part, and after mentioning his

XLV. 6955—1447. mense julio ind. X.

Imperator Ioannes Palaeologus prorogat pactiones anteriores cum Venetis factas in annos quinque.

† Ἰωάννης, ἐν Χριστῷ τῷ Θεῷ πιστός βασιλεὺς καὶ αὐτοκράτωρ Ῥωμαίων, ὁ Παλαιόλογος καὶ ἀεὶ αὔγουστος. ἐπὶ ὁ ἐπιφανὴς καὶ μεγαλοκρητὴς κῆρ Φραντζέσκος Φώσκης, Θεοῦ χάριτι δουὲς Βενετίας καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ, τράμμασι προσέταξε τῷ ἐξηρημένῳ, εὐγενεὶ καὶ φρόνιμῳ ἀνδρὶ, κορῷ Νιάρτῳ Μόρῳ, ἐντίμῳ καὶ περιφανεὶ μπατοῦλῳ ἐν τῇ Κωνσταντινουπόλει καὶ ἐν πάσῃ τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῆς Ῥωμανίας, ἔχοντι ἐνεκτῆ ἐξουσίαν καὶ ἄδειαν καὶ ὀρισμὸν τρακταῖσαι καὶ ποιῆσαι καὶ βεβαιῶσαι καὶ πληρῶσαι τρέβας καὶ συνθήκας τὰς κατωτέρω γραφησομένας μεταξὺ ἡμῶν τε καὶ τῆς ἡμετέρας βασιλείας καὶ τοῦ προσηρημένου κοροῦ δουκὸς καὶ τοῦ κομοουίνου Βενετίας, καθὼς δηλοῦται διὰ τινος τράμματος δουκινοῦ αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἐπιφανοῦς καὶ μεγαλοκρητοῦς κοροῦ δουκὸς καὶ τοῦ κομοουίνου Βενετίας καταχωρωμένου βόλλῃ μολεβδίνῃ μετὰ σχεϊνίου καναβίου δοθέντος ἐν τῷ δουκιῷ παλατίῳ αὐτοῦ τοῦ κομοουίνου ἔτι ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ σαρκώσεως χιλιοστῷ τετρακοσιοστῷ τεσσαρακοστῷ ἕκτῳ, ἰνδικτιῶνος θ', ἡμέρᾳ κζ' τοῦ μηνὸς ἰουλίου κατὰ τὸ ἔθος τῆς Βενετίας, δευθέντος καὶ δοθέντος τῇ βασιλείᾳ μου, ἡμεῖς Ἰωάννης, ἐν Χριστῷ τῷ Θεῷ πιστός βασιλεὺς καὶ αὐτοκράτωρ Ῥωμαίων, ὁ Παλαιόλογος, εἰ ἡμῶν καὶ τῆς βασιλείας ἡμῶν, ἔτι τε τῶν κληρονόμων καὶ διαδόχων ἡμῶν, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ὁ εἰρημίνος μπατοῦλος δικαίῳ καὶ ὀνόματι τοῦ προσηρημένου ἐπιφανοῦς κοροῦ δουκὸς καὶ τοῦ κομοουίνου Βενετίας ὑπὲρ εἰρήνης καὶ ἀγάπης ἐκατέρωθεν ὀφειλομένης τηρηθῆναι καὶ φυλάξαι ἐπὶ τὸ κρεῖττον αὐξηθησομένης, ἐπικαλοσάμενοι τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ Χριστοῦ, συνέβημεν ἐπὶ τούτοις, δηλονότι, ἵνα ἀπὸ τῆς παρουσίας ἡμέρας καὶ εἰς τὸ ἔμπροσθεν μέχρι πάντε ἐτῶν τῶν ἐφεξῆς ἀκολουθησόντων μεταξὺ ἡμῶν τε καὶ τῆς βασιλείας ἡμῶν καὶ τοῦ ἡμετέρου λαοῦ, ἔτι τε τῶν κληρονόμων καὶ διαδόχων ἡμῶν καὶ αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἐπιφανοῦς κοροῦ δουκὸς καὶ τοῦ κομοουίνου Βενετίας καὶ πάντων τῶν ὀποτεταγμένων αὐτοῖς διαμένουσιν ἐν ἰσχύει καὶ ἀκμῇ εὐλοκρεῖν καὶ ὀμονοίᾳ τρέβαι ὀφειλοῦσαι διαρκεῖν. στηρίζοντες καὶ βεβαιῶντες μέ-

Fig. 1. First page of the transcription of John VIII's chrysobull (1448)
Source: Miklosich, Müller 1902, 216

name he presents himself as the autocrator of the Romans in the name of Christ (cf. Figs. 1-2).

Proceeding into the narrative part of the documents, or as Theunissen (1998, 197) calls it *expositio-naratio section* of both treaties the Venetian bailo in Constantinople and the Venetian doge are mentioned, and it is underlined that the peace agreement is valid between the two countries, the two peoples and all those who are subordinate to the doge on the one hand, and to the Emperor or the Sultan, on the other. The *dispositio* element (Theunissen 1998, 197) is the part where the clauses of the treaty are listed, as most of them have been reciprocal in the 1446 *ahd-nāme*. The provisions in John’s chrysobull are not mutual for both sides, probably due to the political and economic weakness of the Byzantine Empire. The contracts also include the *sanctio*. Here Mehmed II swears to keep the peace, as long as the Venetians do the same, and mentions that he will punish anyone of his subjects who has done any damage to the *Comune Veneciarum* and the latter was obliged to respond with the same. As for the

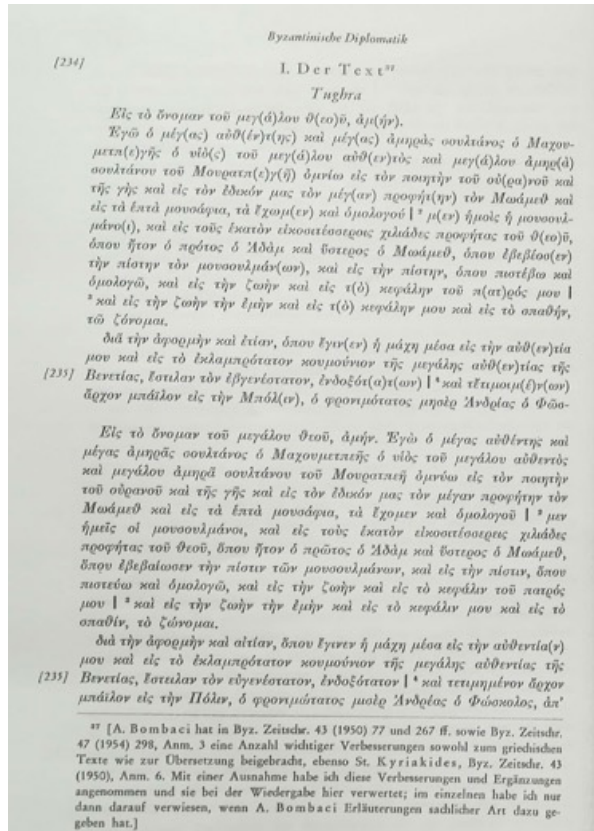


Fig 2. First page of transcription of Mehmed II’s *ahd-nāme* (1446)
Source: Babinger, Dölger 1956, 210

treaty signed by John, it is possible to observe there the already mentioned swearing on the life-giving cross and the Gospels.

In fact, the chrysobull was the traditional form for drafting treaties between Venice and Byzantium since as early as 992 (Theunissen 1998, 58). The Venetians used to write these documents in red ink and stamp them with a gold seal; this practice, similar to the Byzantine chrysobulls, dates back to the Seljuks. The Sultan's signature – *eius superscriptum* (the tughra) – was placed at the top of the document, as was the case with the Byzantine emperors (Theunissen 1998, 62). These facts allow Theunissen to assert that the Seljuk Sultans and the Venetian *Podestas* (the Primate of the Venetian colonies) have deliberately adopted these Byzantine customs.

Even without listing all these deliberations, so far the resemblance between the last Byzantine trade charter with Venice and the first such contract between the city of the lagoon and the Sultan who conquered Constantinople should not surprise us. It can be viewed as an embodiment and symbol of the fact that the processes characterizing the relations between Byzantium and the Venetian thalassocracy preserved their general configuration with respect to the Ottoman rulers. The main reason for this is that the contractual relationship between Byzantium and Venice created a sustainable framework for many of the cultural and economic interactions in the Eastern Mediterranean not only during the late Middle Ages. We observe continuity in the Early Modern Period, where the Sublime Gate was becoming an increasingly important factor in international politics. These arguments attach enough broad scope and significance to the subject in question.

The Byzantine heritage, however, is not confined only to the economic and commercial activities and the diplomatic formulas in the aforementioned chronological and geographical space. The whole Ottoman state apparatus and functioning of society was not much more than a continuation of the Byzantine model. In other words, the Islamic culture of the Ottomans followed directly the "Byzantine style of theocracy and adoption of the Byzantine formal institutions" (Vryonis 1969-70, 307). A bracket should be opened here however, because other authors challenge these statements thus forming a scholarly debate on the genesis of the Ottoman state machinery. Mehmet Köprülü (1953) is one of them. He argues that Western impacts were not that strong in the Ottoman case. However, if Vryonis's opinion is accepted as reliable, then it is necessary to take into account that the Ottoman culture, although being Muslim in the high echelons of the state, remained largely Byzantine in the folk culture, hence amidst the vast portion of the populace. This confirms again that the Byzantine world continued its existence, even physically, long after the demise of the empire and the conquest of Constantinople by Mehmed II the Conqueror.

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